

notes

Diana Thater's comments have been excerpted from a conversation between Carol Reese and Diana Thater on the occasion of the opening of her exhibition *Delphine* at the Secession, Vienna, 2000, published in *Diana Thater: Delphine* (Vienna: Secession, 2000), pp. 23–28. Reprinted by permission from Carol Reese and Diana Thater.

1. See Adam Frank, "Quantum Honeybees," *Discover* 18, no. 11 (November 1997).
2. Diana Thater, "... and the image as a narrative," discussion with Kathryn Kanjo, in *Diana Thater: Selected Works 1992–1996* (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1996), n.p.

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checklist

***Knots + Surfaces*, 2001**

video installation

5 LCD video projectors, 16 video monitors,

6 DVD players, Lee filters, Madico window film,
existing architecture

Born in 1962 in San Francisco, **Diana Thater** studied art history at New York University and then acquired an MFA from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena in 1990. Since her first solo show at Dorothy Goldeen Gallery in Santa Monica in 1991, she has exhibited widely throughout North America and Europe, including numerous biennials, such as the Carnegie International (1999), Johannesburg Biennial (1997), Whitney Biennial (1997, 1995), Sydney Biennial (1996), Kwangju Biennial (1995), and the Lyon Biennial (1995). In addition to one-person shows at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles (1998), the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1997), Kunsthalle Basel (1996), The Renaissance Society, Chicago (1996), and Witte de With, Rotterdam (1994), and elsewhere, her most recent museum exhibitions were held at the Tentsta Konsthalle, Stockholm (2001) and the Vienna Secession (2000). Thater lives and works in Los Angeles.

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Diana Thater

Knots + Surfaces

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Cover Photo: Diana Thater

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Diana Thater Knots + Surfaces

I want to offer an artistic space where consciousness may be reconstructed, as opposed to making work that reinforces what it has been assumed to be. . . . My idea is that to develop a new viewer, or a new frame of viewing, one must present as subjects those who are traditionally seen as objects. This is a place to begin. In order to transform a viewer who probably brings to the work a singular point of view, I present her with a disconcerting space, one with images embedded in it that make it move, that change it. And these images undermine the singularity of time, space, and being. They do it through the image of nature—animals whose experience of time and space never seems to me to be singular and who express their experience of “present-ness” with their whole beings.

Installation is about sculpting time and space; it is not necessarily pictorial, nor is it object-based. That installation directly addresses consciousness—that it raises questions about subjectivity—is what most interests me. When one moves through the space of an installation and is aware of this movement, one achieves what Robert Morris calls “present-ness.” One engages what Morris describes as the “I”—living, imageless, here and now in time and space—as opposed to the “me”—the self remembered in an arrested state, not in motion but as if in a photograph, frozen in time. It is this possibility of “present-ness” that installation addresses, and it is what defines it as a medium equivalent to painting and sculpture. This is why my work is so much about molding space and pulling apart the architecture, as opposed to making narratives. I don’t want the viewer to fall into the linear progression of a story—this is why I give my work no narrative dimension. It is the sculptural qualities of the work that I am trying to make dimensional, palpable, deep. I want to use architectural elements within an installation to create a dialogue with my work, a dialogue between sculpture and architecture.

The image is not ultimately the most important thing—the creation of space is. So, this is what I work to achieve through editing and re-editing. . . . The edited work is completed in the editing room, but the piece is completed in the installation process.

I am given a space, then I have to figure out how to deal with it. I am trying to use installation to foreground space; this, for the most part, is the focus of my work. It’s very difficult to make space visible, but this is the task I set [for] myself in working within whatever is the given architecture.

I think of space as . . . consciousness and architecture together. . . . For me, the feminine sensibility, which anyone of any gender can sport, is one that is not singular. . . . I want the viewer to not stand still, to feel the work moving and to understand it in motion. One point perspective is neither depicted nor inscribed in the work. Multiple points of perspective and flat space are formed. . . . It is within this space that I find freedom.

I make figurative images in a pictorial medium and place them in the exhibition space in an attempt to form work in which two things, which are almost impossible to talk about but that can surely be felt, intersect—the worlds of time (video) and space (architecture)—such

that one kind of space (the flat space of video) is wrapped within an enframing space (walls, ceiling, floor) that it also destabilizes.

Form and content (and I always include tools/technology in “form”) are inseparable from one another. A camera, a camera angle, and a filmed subject all serve to reinforce one another; this is how technology and beauty coexist. The way the thing is formed and the tools used to form it can be one and the same. The content in my work is a model for what I want the form to be.

I think hiding the technology shows a misunderstanding ultimately of the media. On the other hand, foregrounding the technology is just about a show of money. Transcendence happens everyday in every kind of space, and my point is that it can happen here and now with old, ugly technology and the machines buzzing, because that technology forms the image and holds the image and is endemic to it.

—Diana Thater

In *Knots + Surfaces* (2001), commissioned for Dia’s third-floor gallery, Diana Thater takes as her point of departure a provocative hypothesis for charting six-dimensional space. Proposed by the young mathematician Barbara Shipman, it reveals certain telling analogies with a map of the bee dance: upon returning to the hive after locating a new source of food a worker bee communicates to her fellows the direction, distance, and location of the site together with details about the quality of the pollen or nectar it contains.¹ Encountering Shipman’s theory by chance several years ago, Thater became intrigued by its account of ways of negotiating space and time wholly outside human experience, if not cognizance. She was equally fascinated by its correlatives with the matrix in which bees function. Given that they are highly attuned to the subtlest shifts in the earth’s magnetic poles, not only can worker bees convey information to their cohorts in terms radically unlike ours, but they perceive and navigate space according to fundamentally different sets of coordinates. With hexagonally faceted complex eyes and sensory mechanisms aligned to alternate time-space and light ratios, they build a milieu of hexagonally shaped cellular structures, the honeycomb from which the hive is composed.

Reference to this thesis led Thater to map Dia’s gallery with juxtaposed DVD projections of hexagonally shaped colored forms, recorded on film, onto each of which she layered three video sequences of bees swarming. Shot from a variety of angles and distances, this video footage was, in addition, at times slowed to varying degrees. Nonetheless, it has been edited primarily in relation to space rather than to time since, instead of a linear and hence potentially narrative flow, the looped footage incorporates constant fluctuation in depth, as it restlessly shifts focus from close-up to midshot to distant panoramic views. The perceived flatness and immediacy inherent in video as a medium counterpoints the luminous sensual color of film, animated here by the almost imperceptible tremor inherent to filming, enabling the two media to reinforce and mutually deconstruct one another. Intermittently interrupting the continuous flow on each projector, a number appears briefly.

Initially devised as an aide-mémoire for distinguishing between the twenty-odd disks the artist made when preparing this work, the device was retained in the final presentation, partly in homage to Structuralist film, long formative on her thinking, and partly to reinforce that state of reflexive awareness so fundamental to her work.

Thater also introduced into the space a video wall made from stacked monitors, a sculptural element designed to reinforce awareness of her interventions into the actual architecture of the venue; though subject to systemic graphing by the modular grid, a giant, luminous flower, the putative source of the bee’s frenzied activity, radiates from the video bank, an irresistible magnet. By gelling the windows with a gray filter and bathing the walls devoid of fenestration with color ranging across the pink, magenta, and crimson end of the spectrum, she delicately but indubitably molds the perimeter of the site. And, by only marginally tempering the given light levels, she ensures that a visitor cannot fail to identify and define the literal space, yet can easily slip into those illusionistic recesses within the mesmerizing projections from which—uncannily and unexpectedly—bees momentarily emerge to clamber along columns and beams, or to cluster and hover indecisively around each other, before abruptly disappearing, often seemingly into the very fabric of the concrete structure itself.

Propelled irresistibly forward by the dramatic vertigo of this embracing swathe of animated imagery, distracted, even disconcerted, by insects randomly looming and dissolving like monumental specters or speeding by in frenetic convoys, the viewer who meanders speculatively through this unstable, incohesive medley of elusive spaces becomes increasingly conscious of the impossibility of finding any single vantage point from which the cacophonous panoply will cohere into a seamless entity available for comfortable comprehension (and consumption). Sucked momentarily from the fictive world of intersecting spatiotemporal vectors, the viewer suddenly finds herself transfixed, rapt by the gently swaying Medusa-like icon of desire whose beguiling rhythmic undulations, which may have been caused by a slight breeze, recall the effects of a far-from-steady recording device. By means of a constant oscillation between subject and object, absorption and detachment, immersion and distance, suffusion and self-awareness, Thater governs, shapes, and ultimately transforms the spectator’s understanding of the space. Far from deflecting critical inquiry, the seductive, alluring character of the experience encourages a heightened consciousness of its manifold means, intricately woven from place, circumstance, technique, and technology. As this vehicle for reflexively foregrounding the viewer’s role reveals itself to be an instantiation of the very thematic of *Knots + Surfaces*, Thater’s abiding preoccupation—“The content of my work is a model of what I want the form to be”—is eloquently realized. Once again, “The question . . . is, ‘What world do I inhabit?’”²